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WILL SCARLET THE BRAVE.



A STORY OF SAXON RIGHT 'AGAINST NORMAN MIGHT

CHAPTER 1.

The Beginning of a New Campaign.

HEAVY rains had washed away the snows of winter, spires of emerald grass peeped from the earth, buds were ready to burst from the trees, and birds were merrily chirping in anticipation of the long bright days to come. For spring was on the land.

All through the winter little had been heard of Robin Hood and his merry men. Some had lived in caves, others, the more humble foresters, had returned to their homesteads, knowing that while the snow lay deep and winter held all within its icy grip no Norman tyrant would trouble to molest them. But with the return of warmer weather they drove their cattle and carried their goods and chattels deeper into the forest.

And out from the very depths there came one morning the ringing notes of a hunter's horn. Again and again it echoed, but there was no response.

The breeze whispered through the trees; a startled stag pricked up its ears and made a dash for cover, the birds ceased warbling to listen, but no human voice answered the signal, for signal it was.

Presently, out of a space partially cleared of trees, and where the cropped and stunted undergrowth was so short that it took strange and fantastic forms, there leaped a young man. His name was

Will Scarlet, a devoted follower of Robin Hood, the Outlaw King of Sherwood Forest.

Will Scarlet was handsome, and long and strong of limb. He wore a green doublet, with a scarlet band, scarlet hose, brown boots, and belt to match. He was armed with a long dagger, hanging loosely by a chain at his belt; at his back were the ever-beloved bow and arrows; and in his right hand he carried a spear, such as was used for attacking and slaying wild boars. In his left hand was the hunting horn, with which he from time to time awoke the echoes of the forest.

Will Scarlet was running for his life. Men on foot and men on horseback were in hot pursuit. He had gone to Nottingham under Robin Hood's direction, and, while making a purchase for his sweetheart Martha, a henchman in the employ of Oswald de Burgh, the hated Sheriff of Nottingham, had recognised him and sounded the alarm.

Will Scarlet and the henchman closed, but the short wrestling bout soon came to an end. The Norman lay senseless in the roadway, with his head cracked and his knees drawn up to his chin. But the alarm had spread.

Unable to fetch his horse, which he had left tethered, Will Scarlet took to his heels. At first he enjoyed the fun of being hunted, and now and then stopped to take a shot at his pursuers, but when troopers in light armour

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took up the chase matters began to look serious.

But Will Scarlet had the measure of his own powers of endurance. A run of five or six miles was child's-play to him, and he had accomplished ten without a single halt. He had the advantage, too, of knowing the intricacies of the forest, and for a long time led his pursuers such a merry dance that they swore by everything they could think of to make short work of him when he fell into their hands. Spreading out, and spurring their horses to fury, they tried to surround him.

Then it was that Will Scarlet saw his danger, but never for a moment did he lose heart. He had got his second wind, and raced on, blowing his horn at intervals.

The Normans made sure of him. Some had already outflanked him, and one was already couching his lance to bring him down, when, like a whirlwind, there rushed through the trees as odd a friend as ever stood a man in need. A donkey, a mad, kicking, braying donkey, and nothing more!

Balaam, at times the pride of Friar Tuck's heart and at others the bane of his life, flew open-mouthed at the Norman trooper and, seizing him by the thigh, dragged him from the saddle.

Quickly following came Hector and Vulcan, Robin Hood's stag-hounds, and as they leaped, and bayed, and tore at the Normans, there came a stinging flight of arrows, like bolts from the blue.

Hands up, heads down, the troopers dropped from their saddles to the ground, as though smitten with some awful plague that kills instantly. And then, swinging his quarter-staff, came the redoubtable Friar Tuck, bounding over brake and brier like a man in the prime of life.

"Get you behind me, Will, my boy," he said, smiling all over his rosy, shining face. "Ho, there! you varlets! Is there one left among you that durst come into single combat with a man of peace?"

"I do not understand," Will Scarlet gasped. "Where is Robin Hood? Where are our friends?"

"Coming, coming," the jolly friar replied. "Robin is taking the strength of the enemy. Enemy, forsooth! Where be these brave Normans? Where be these steel-clad, boastful warriors?"

Such as had escaped unwounded had wisely taken refuge behind the trees, and were making ready to retreat. But flight was cut off. Closing up suddenly, and shouting their battle-cry, "Sweet liberty or death," Robin Hood and a score of his followers hemmed them in.

"Noble-blooded gentles," said Robin Hood, moving away from his men and doffing his plumed cap, "I fear that I must trouble you for your weapons. Not that I require them, for in good truth my armoury is full. Your horses, too, I shall require; and as for yourselves, you will attend my faithful friend, Little John, and follow him in peaceful obedience whither he may lead you."

"To a shameful death from the branch of a tree," said one of the Normans, scowling, as he flung down his battle-axe. "Well, what does it matter? A man can die but once."

"We have met before," said Robin Hood, gazing wistfully at the man. "You are known as Roger the Harelipped, and a rascal you are."

"They say the same of you," Roger the Harelipped retorted.

"They? Who? The Normans, of course. But truth is unknown when Normans speak. Wretch, it was you who, when your vile master burnt a humble cottage, thrust back women and children among the flames. Yes, you shall assuredly die."

By this time Little John, the huge man of strength, was walking among the captives disarming them. They submitted without a word, for the giant forester carried so terrible an axe that an ordinary man could not have held it out at arm's-length.

"Bind that miscreant," Robin Hood said, pointing to Roger the Harelipped. "I would have speech with an honest man. Come hither, Will Scarlet, and let me grasp your hand. I am sorry that these Normans made you stretch your legs, but they did us good service."

"Like Balaam, most noble of creatures," said Friar Tuck. "Marked you with what joy he kissed that Norman with his beautiful mouth? It was a sight worth living to see."

"I'll listen to the praises of the ass anon," Robin Hood said, laughing. "If you will, Balaam shall be barbed and coated with steel. But go with the rest and call the hounds to heel. I have business with Will Scarlet just now. And now, Will," the outlaw continued, "I greet you once more. These Normans have given us some fine horses, and delivered a villain into our hands. That is news to make a forester's blood dance with delight. What news have you brought me?"

"Nothing, but that Oswald de Burgh is preparing to hunt you down, and to bring you to what he calls justice."

"I have heard that so often that it is no news at all," Robin Hood rejoined. "What of Prince John?"

"He is in London, holding his court there."

"This fine weather should tempt him into the country. Well! What of Richard, our lion-hearted king?"

"Still abroad fighting the Saracens," Will Scarlet replied.

"And more's the pity," said Robin Hood. "By the rood! there are surely heathens enough in England without crossing the seas to find them. Are there guests at the castle?"

"There must be, for there were banners flying over the keep, but whose arms they bore I know not."

"And yet, Will, you tell me that you bring no news," Robin Hood said. "Death of tyrants! we'll find out who these strangers are, and their business, ere long."

This conversation brought them to the well-concealed entrance of a cavern. Ivy and other evergreens had been trained to fall over it like a screen, but so naturally that none but those in the secret would have dreamed of what lay behind.

Most of the outlaws and their prisoners had already passed in.

A few foresters remained bringing up the horses and weapons, of which Little John had apportioned to each a share.

Maid Marian, Martha, and Mildred—the last two damsels owing their deliverance and happiness in their forest home to the outlaw—advanced gleefully to meet Robin Hood and Will Scarlet.

"All yesterday I watched for you," Martha said, throwing her arms round Will Scarlet's neck and kissing him fondly.

"And all yesterday I thought of you," Will replied, looking proudly into her eyes. "Ah, Martha, Heaven was good to draw our two hearts together!"

"Come; we'll dine, and do our sweetheating afterwards," Robin Hood said merrily. "Bustle, bustle, girls, for there are hungry men to feed."

So little notice was taken of the prisoners that they marvelled at it, as they stood silent and sullen at the far end of the cave.

The face of Roger the Harelipped was ghastly. His doom was sealed.

Though Little John unbound his arms, and gave him food and some light ale brewed by the foresters, he knew it was to be his last meal. He tried to bear up bravely under the trial, but his heart failed him. He saw, as it were, the ghosts of his victims rise up before him, and the awful fear of death came upon him.

The outlaws, too, perhaps, were less talkative than usual, and there was no singing after they had satisfied their appetites.

Suddenly Robin Hood gave a sign with his hand.

Maid Marian understood it, and called the girls to follow her to a recess hewn out of the solid wall of the cave, and curtained with a fine piece of tapestry. She knew by that sign that Robin Hood would show no mercy to Roger the Harelipped, nor did she attempt by look, word, or gesture to plead with him.

No sooner had the girls retired than the foresters rose and, standing at attention, formed two lines. Then Little John touched Roger the Harelipped on the shoulder and pointed to the mouth of the cave.

Not a word was spoken. The drama had been played before, and needed no rehearsal.

Little John pushed Roger the Harelipped into the open air, and he was followed by the foresters.

Soon Robin Hood appeared and, facing the prisoner, said:

"By the way you came, so shall you return," he said; "but how far your legs will carry you, I know not. You and your fellow Normans hunted Will Scarlet; it's now your turn to be hunted. Let him go, Little John, and you, Roger the Harelipped, run for your life, and save it if you can."

The man needed no second warning. Bracing himself up and doubling like a hare, he sped away, while several foresters—a sort of execution squad—coolly fitted arrows to their bows.

Fifty, a hundred yards Roger the Harelipped covered. Then he was transfixed by four or five arrows. He caught at his breath, reeled, staggered wildly to and fro, and then, falling forward with a crash on his face, lay still.

"The wages of sin is death," said Robin Hood gravely. "A few of you men go and bury him. The rest I leave to employ themselves as they may think proper. Sit with me, Will, and bid Martha come to your side. Sweet Marian shall sing to us."

Evening came, and with it a light mist falling upon the forest like a beautiful gauze.

At this time of year immense wild boars were wont to roam through Sherwood Forest.

These creatures were both fierce and courageous, and did not scruple to try conclusions with the boldest of hunters, for, armed with gleaming tusks, strength, and cunning modes of attack, they were formidable foes.

Several of these boars had passed the cave at sundown, and although Robin Hood had made up his mind to release the rest of the prisoners, after sending them to a dense part of the forest, he did not like to do so that night lest they, being unarmed, should fall victims to the savage creatures.

The outlaws had not much fear that the Normans would remember the way to the cave, for Will Scarlet had led them such a dance that they were miles

out of the main track through the forest.

The captives made no demur, and thought themselves lucky to escape with their lives. To their great astonishment they were treated with every consideration; Little John bringing in great bundles of rushes for them to sleep upon, and feeding them better than even they were fed at Nottingham Castle.

The Normans fell asleep, and soon darkness reigned, save for a single lamp that gleamed above where Robin Hood lay and shed a feeble ray on his handsome face.

From time to time the sentries were changed, and when it came to Will Scarlet's turn he leaped to his feet and went to his post, as fresh as though he had rested for a week.

It was a still, starlit night. The mist had lifted, and the boles of the great trees stood out distinctly.

Will Scarlet, resting his spear in the hollow of his arms, walked to and fro. Like the others he was glad that the winter had gone, and yearned for the excitement fine weather would bring in the struggle of right against might.

Suddenly there came to his ears a medley of snuffling and grunting sounds, telling him that a wild boar was not far off. It occurred to him that the brute was rooting under the dead leaves for the acorns which had fallen late in the autumn.

Will Scarlet did not relish having one of these tusked monsters so near him; while, on the other hand, he did not like to run the risk of rousing his slumbering comrades, for a wild boar when wounded made a terrific noise. So he kept his eyes open and watched.

Presently he saw the boar, and a thought struck him that its shape was rather peculiar. It seemed to be afflicted in its hind quarters, dragging them slowly and painfully over the ground; but the brute might be very old, or had met with some mishap.

Will Scarlet, stepping back noiselessly, stood in the shadow of a tree, and then he felt his hair begin to bristle, for the boar rose on its haunches, cast off its skin, and in its place stood a man.

Life in the forest, amid strange scenes and strange sounds, was answerable for many of the legends that are ridiculed in these matter-of-fact days; but although Will Scarlet was as brave as a lion he half-believed in fairies, sprites, etc., and, naturally, this sudden transformation from boar to man sent his blood running cold through his veins.

But only for a moment. He banished all thoughts of the supernatural from his mind, and knowing that he was in the presence of a man he laughed in his sleeve at the trick that had failed.

Will Scarlet was, however, in no great hurry to take action. Other events were to happen, and he gave them time to develop.

Soon there came another boar shuffling along, and went through the same performance as the first.

The men were lightly attired, and were evidently spies, tempted by bribes to discover Robin Hood's stronghold.

This was plain enough, but there was something more. A few of Oswald de Burgh's men had carried the news of defeat to Nottingham Castle, and these adventurers in pigskins had volunteered to see how matters really stood.

Were there any more "boars" to come?

Will Scarlet concluded that such was not the case, as the two men, standing with their heads close together, whispered and pointed. Presently they came nearer, and the forester felt his Saxon blood course hotly with excitement. He grasped his spear in readiness for anything that might happen.

Nearer and nearer. A few more steps, and the Norman spies were face to face with Will Scarlet.

Speech failed them; it seemed to them that an avenging spirit was confronting them, and, trembling from head to foot, they dropped their weapons and stood as if their feet had taken root.

Will Scarlet had not the heart to kill these defenceless men, until one, recovering from his stupefied condition, leaped backwards and drew his dagger.

Then the bright steel head of the hunting spear flashed in the starlight,

and the forester dealt a fatal blow to the man who thus menaced his life.

The other spy made for a tree, and, scuttling up it, hid in the branches, but they afforded him no good cover.

Will Scarlet coolly fitted an arrow to his bow.

"Come down," he said softly. "Come down. Robin Hood will be glad to see you when he wakes."

For reply the Norman hurled his dagger at the Saxon, missing Will's head by only a hair's-breadth. This sealed his doom. Whiz! went the arrow, and down crashed the man.

As luck would have it, the noise woke no one but Friar Tuck, who, seizing his quarter-staff, crawled out of the tent and ran to Will Scarlet.

"Now, by my faith! you have done well, indeed," said the friar when he comprehended what had taken place. "But for you, Will, my boy, we should have had Oswald de Burgh and every man he can muster swarming like bees about us to-morrow. 'Twas a clever trick to find our whereabouts, but thanks to you it failed."

"You will make me blush with your praises, good friar," Will Scarlet said, laughing. "Had it been a darker night, I'd not seen so well, and these fellows might have stolen away. But get to your rest again."

"Nay," Friar Tuck replied. "I'll stay with you until you are relieved from duty."

CHAPTER 2.

Fighting the Fire-fiends.—A Beaten Foe Turns Friend.

SCARCE had the sun risen when Robin Hood came out and learnt how well Will Scarlet had done his duty.

"When next we relieve a tyrant of a fat purse I will empty it into Will Scarlet's hand," he said. "But enough! We'll break our fast, and be abroad, for it is a morn for hunting."

"And the larder is getting rather low," Friar Tuck remarked.

"No wonder, when you hover near it so lovingly," Little John growled.

"Child!" retorted the friar, "when next you are in danger I'll see your

head cracked in a dozen places before I lift my quarter-staff in your defence."

"That is so far from the truth that you will have to answer for it," Little John said. "Friar, you love me too well to allow a hair of my head to be harmed."

"Wait and see," Friar Tuck said.

He tried to look serious and severe, but so dismal was the attempt that the men near him threw their heads back and roared with laughter.

The first thing done was to dispose of the prisoners. They were blindfolded and led into a thicket three miles from the cave, and left to find their way out of the forest as best they could.

In the meantime the hunting-party was being formed. It consisted of Robin Hood and Maid Marian, Will Scarlet and Martha, and Ned Carter and Mildred Dale, all of whom were splendidly mounted and equipped. They were accompanied by a few beaters and spearmen, and, of course, by a number of hounds.

It was a lovely spring morning, and the sweet air brought the colour of the rose to the cheeks of the ladies, and gave an additional lustre to their bright eyes.

The horses, too, partook in the general exhilaration, and moved gracefully, ready at the word to gallop, to strain every thew and sinew.

Suddenly the hounds pricked their ears and, raising their heads, stopped. It was the signal that something was in the way.

Robin Hood held up his hand, and the whole party halted. The beautifully-trained horses stood motionless, with never a champ at the bit, or jingle of a buckle.

There was no stag or deer in sight, and no track indicating that any large animal had passed this way. But the hounds had not been mistaken. Their keen eyes had detected something moving in the distance, and presently an old man, leaning heavily on a staff and carrying a faggot on his back, appeared in sight.

"Fine game, I must say," Robin Hood remarked. "Let us get along, or morn will pass before we have shot an arrow."

"Robin," Maid Marian said, "you will not let the old man go without giving him something."

"We shall pass him on our way," the outlaw replied. "Will Scarlet, ride forward and ask yonder poor fellow where he lives and what he stands in need of most. Give him this noble from me, and tell him to buy a better doublet, and shoon that will keep the water out."

Will Scarlet rode forward, and saluting the old man bent over in the saddle and spoke to him.

Suddenly, as if astonished at something he heard, he alighted.

"There is news of some kind, or Will would never have left his horse," Robin Hood said. "Let us press forward."

In a few minutes they were gathering round the old forester.

"This man, Edmund Swayes by name, tells me of a cruel deed to be done to-day. His son, the holder of a house and land, which he declares to be his own freehold under the signature of King Richard, has been ordered to quit by Oswald de Burgh."

"Go on," said Robin Hood sternly.

"And failing obedience his homestead is to be burnt before his eyes."

"Where is this place?" Robin Hood demanded, sitting as stiff as a pillar of marble in the saddle.

"At Huckleberry," old Edmund Swayes replied. "Two leagues by the green path."

"I know it well," the outlaw said. "The monastery lies back from it."

"Indeed that is true, noble sir."

"And where is your son?"

"Hiding somewhere in the forest with his wife and child."

"I'll see to it," Robin Hood said. "But how comes it that you are wandering about in these lonely parts?"

"We thought it better to separate," the old man responded, with tears in his eyes. "I was looking for somewhere to build a fire to warm these shrunken limbs of mine."

"We'll hunt to-morrow instead of today," said Robin Hood to those around him.

In a trice he was off his horse and lifting Edmund Swayes, feebly resist-

ing, easily from the ground, he placed him astride the saddle.

"I'll lead you where you shall be well cared for," Robin continued. "So sit you still and be content. I'll to Huckleberry before the sun reaches overhead."

Paying no heed to the old man's thanks and blessings, the Outlaw King of Sherwood Forest returned with his party to the cave.

"Sweetheart," he said to Maid Marian, "I am sorry to disappoint you, but—"

"Rather be glad that Heaven has called you to do a good deed," Marian interrupted. "Be quick and away."

"Oh, if I could but bring Oswald de Burgh back with me!" Robin Hood said, clenching his hands. "Ho there, John! rouse up the men. We'll leave but six here, for the Normans have work dear to their hearts to do in another part of the forest, and will not be likely to come this way."

"We are but twenty-six," Little John replied. "Shall I send out the scouts and bring the foresters in?"

"Not so; there is not a moment to lose. With twenty good men at my back I'll fear nothing, though the enemy number a hundred. Quick! Boot and saddle! Spear and bow. Fire and death threaten the innocent and oppressed; but by Heaven I'll have an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth!"

Robin Hood was in a great rage. His soul revolted at the thought that even Oswald de Burgh could return so quickly to his evil work. The winter was harsh to the poor, but not half so cruel as the Sheriff of Nottingham when the sun shone, and his hirelings could hunt men like wild beasts.

The foresters literally sprang to their arms, and the roll being quickly called, off they went.

Not more than a mile had been swept from under the hoofs of the horses when right ahead of them the blue faded from the sky, and a dun-coloured hue took its place. Robin Hood knew it to be smoke.

"So," he hissed, "these fiends have commenced their work early! Let them look to it! Let them look to it!"

"Edmund Swayes, the younger, and his wife and child are at least safe," Will Scarlet remarked.

"Who knows? That may be so or not. If these fiends of perdition have run them to earth, a sorry sight will greet our eyes. But we'll hope for the best, Will."

"Ay, and we'll do our best."

Little John, mounted on his powerful horse, came thundering to Robin Hood's side.

"Listen, chief!" he said, brandishing his enormous axe, "I'll ask no better favour of you than to ride alone into the midst of these Normans. Let me do it. I never felt so strong as now, and this axe of mine is like a live thing, and as eager as I."

"What! Think you that we wish to lose our baby boy?" Robin Hood replied, laughing. "Tush! Look not so glum. I will meet you halfway. Will Scarlet shall be with you shoulder to shoulder, and fear not but that we will quickly follow."

"King of Sherwood Forest!" cried Will Scarlet, in accents of delight, "my thanks for this. I want to show Martha that I am truly worthy of her love."

"She knows that already," Robin Hood said.

"Faith!" growled Little John, "'tis time that I looked for a sweetheart. Ho, ho! Fancy this baby in love!"

"Hush!" Robin Hood said. "Not another word. We'll walk our horses now, for we are past the monastery, and Swayes' homestead, or all that remains of it, will soon come in view."

Almost as soon as the outlaw chief had spoken they saw a scene of ruthless devastation.

The house, a small, thatched cottage, with outbuildings and byres for a few cattle, stood in a garden, which had begun to bloom with early flowers.

A number of black-bearded and uncouth men were pitching blazing faggots round the house, while one in command directed the proceedings.

It was impossible to save the once cosy little homestead; but it was a great relief to the foresters to see that there was no more dreadful sight than

flames fighting their way out of the roof.

"We'll charge on horseback," Robin Hood said, checking his horse and shading his eyes with his hand. "How many make you them to be?"

"More than thirty," Will Scarlet replied.

"Thirty men to burn one poor little house," sneered the outlaw. "Go now, and good luck follow you. Little John is waiting."

In a moment Will Scarlet, drawing his sword, was knee to knee with the giant. One word to the horses, and they were tearing down on the enemy.

"Saxons to the rescue! Sweet liberty or death! No Normans!" roared the lion-like voice of Little John.

The Normans flew to their arms. So taken by surprise were they that Will Scarlet and the giant were upon them as they huddled together, hampering each other's movements.

The two foresters went through them like avenging furies.

Robin Hood and the rest of his gallant band followed soon after.

"Strike not to kill if lesser blows suffice to stop their evil work," cried the outlaw chief to his men. "A shower of hefty cracks from the blunts of your weapons should leave such marks upon their heads and hides that they will think thrice ere they burn the humble homes of peaceful Saxons in future."

Robin was ever inclined to be merciful, even to his worst foes, never seeking to take life where lighter punishment would serve.

As the foresters charged upon them the Normans broke and fled in wild disorder.

Several of their number had fallen to the weapons of Little John and Will Scarlet, who had not been disposed to be so merciful as Robin Hood, and two were taken prisoners.

One was a famous wrestler in the employ of Oswald de Burgh, and Will Scarlet recognised him as the man who had raised the alarm at Nottingham.

"It seems that we are yet to have another bout," Will said, flourishing his

notched sword in the man's face. "We do not slaughter our prisoners, after the fashion of Normans; but we know how to deal with varlets!"

"I'll leave him to you," Robin Hood said. "Bring him along at your leisure. My business is to find young Swayes, his wife, and child. They shall stay with us until I can send them to a place of safety."

"I accounted for two only," Little John grumbled. "You were too close behind us, chief. Will and I were equal to all the churls, and I wish they had been left to us."

"You must not be too greedy," Robin Hood replied grimly. "Men, sound your horns joyfully! Spread out, and shout that Saxons have won another victory!"

The poor cottagers, who had been hiding in the forest, were not long in guessing what had happened, and stealing from their coverts they wept for joy at sight of the foresters.

"Dry your tears," said Robin Hood. "You have lost much, but I will make amends. Your house has gone, but another can be built in a more peaceful part of the country, and I trow that you shall not regret even such a day as this. Little John!"

"I am here," replied the giant.

"If I mistake not," Robin Hood said, "one of our stores of dried venison and some wine should be hereabouts."

"In a hollow tree," Little John replied, nodding his head. "I'll conduct you to it presently."

"Then we'll rest awhile, for these poor creatures look famished."

Provisions were hidden in various parts of the forest, for Robin Hood and his men were often out in the open all night. These secret stores were looked after by Little John and Friar Tuck. Some were in holes in the ground, others under thickets, and others in hollow trees. The whereabouts of these places were cunningly marked by the friar and the giant.

Not far away was an oak-tree, with a portion of the bark roughly blazed as if some animal had rubbed itself there.

Little John leaped at one of the lower branches, pulled himself up as

though he was as light as a feather, and crawling along, suddenly shot his arm downwards.

Two bundles, carefully wrapped and corded, he pulled out and lowered into the arms of Ned Carter.

"Food and wine," said Little John as he descended, his great feet thumping on the earth. "What a pity it is that Friar Tuck is not here!"

"That reminds me; I did not see him when we came away," said Robin Hood.

"Neither did I," exclaimed Will Scarlet.

Robin Hood rubbed his head thoughtfully and looked grave.

"I would not have anything happen to him for all I possess," he said. "Where could he go to? Ho there! did anyone see Friar Tuck, or his good friend Balaam, as we were preparing to depart?"

The men looked at each other; but no man answered.

"This puzzles me," said Robin Hood. "I did not include the friar with the six men I left behind. For once I did not even think of him; but surely he would not start on his own account to seek adventure."

"There is no telling," Little John replied. "The older the friar grows, the more obstinate he gets. Ah, good luck! I thought I did not forget to include some horns in this parcel."

"Be careful with the wine, John," said a voice shrilly.

It had so feminine a sound that Little John stared at Mistress Swayes, who was doing her best to comfort her child.

"Be quick with the wine," said Robin Hood. "Our poor friends here need a stimulant."

"Yes, be quick there with it, there's a good boy," the same shrill voice said.

"Heard you that?" Little John demanded, his eyes growing big and round. "'Fore Heaven, this part of the forest is haunted. The very trees have learnt to talk."

"What are you standing there for?" Robin Hood demanded impatiently. "I heard nothing but the crying of the child."

"But I did," Little John replied. "Here is the wine, chief. Pour it out

while I sit down and think this out. I'm not given to idle fancies; but may I be hanged by the first Norman churl—"

A piece of turf came hurtling through the air and caught the giant so smartly on the face that he staggered back.

When he saw Friar Tuck peering at him from behind a tree, mirth and resentment struggled for the mastery in his breast.

"Think you that this is seemly conduct for a father of the church?" Little John demanded. "To play the mountebank—to throw things about like an unruly boy?"

"Keep thy temper, fair babe," the friar retorted. "Balaam, my beloved, come forth. Right well did you bring me hither, and I am only sorry that we were not in time for the fight."

"And so you followed us?" said Robin Hood.

"Yes," replied Friar Tuck as Balaam trotted up and thrust his head under his arm. "But alack, I was delayed. A Norman merchant was eager to borrow my quarter-staff, so I lent him a piece of it for the use of his head, and in return thereon he gave me his thanks in curses."

"I forgive you," Little John said, with a roar of laughter, in which the others joined. "Your wallet is bulging, I see, and Balaam carries a package that I do not remember."

"Like my wallet it contains a few delicacies, which I did not think good for the Norman merchant's health," Friar Tuck responded, with so comical an expression of face that the foresters roared again. "Here are pasties, fresh made, white bread, juicy salted beef, and some flagons of liquor which I trow came from a nobleman's cellar."

"St. Anthony is good to us!" Robin Hood said as he wiped the tears of merriment from his eyes. "Come then! Sit down one and all, and we'll hold a feast. But I'll break no bread, and no drop of wine shall pass my lips, until our poor friends here have received attention."

Edmund Swayes and his wife were given the very best of the provisions, and even Oswald de Burgh's wrestler

was supplied with food and drink. The kindly action touched and surprised him.

"Robin Hood," he said, "may I never be forgiven if I strike a blow against you again. I deserve death, and do not shrink from it, but give me a chance. I'll stake my life on a throw with any man in your company."

"Your tongue has not the Norman twang," the out'aw returned.

"No, I am a Greek by birth. I was left an orphan in this country, and to earn a living took to using my muscles for the amusement of others."

"You have had already one try with Will Scarlet," Robin Hood remarked.

"True; but he took me unawares."

"You hear that, Will?" Robin said.

"I am at your command, and after that at the Greek's service," replied Will Scarlet.

"So we shall have sport, after all," the outlaw chief said. "Rest awhile, and then do your best. Stay! What can our other prisoner do?"

"I am known as William Fleetfoot," was the reply.

"That is sufficient answer," said Robin Hood, smiling. "You can run. Your legs shall be put to the test presently. Now, Sir Wrestler, what is your name?"

"Salmonici."

"A crack-jaw name to creep into bed with," Little John grunted. "My faith, if I had such a one, I'd drown it with myself in the nearest pond."

After some more bantering Robin Hood clapped his hands, as a sign that Will Scarlet and Salmonici were to get ready.

Both were splendid specimens of manhood, and in perfect condition. Stripping off their doublets, they faced each other, crouching after the manner of the time, and circling warily round each other.

Salmonici sprang like a cat, but down went Will Scarlet, and the Greek went flying over his head, but alighted without hurt on his feet.

"Your turn next, Will," said Little John.

"All this skipping and prancing seems waste of time to me," Friar Tuck

said. "There's no weapon in all the world like the quarter-staff. There's life and courage in the grip of it, and music, too, even to the man who feels it. Give me the honest piece of wood, and let all else go."

"Silence!" said Robin Hood. "The men are ready to start again. Now, Will, keep your eyes about you, for the Greek has been taught a lesson, and you may not be so lucky next time."

"I'll look to him and myself, too, never fear," Scarlet replied cheerily.

Again the combatants crouched and circled, with their eyes fixed unblinkingly on each other.

Suddenly the forester feinted. He seemed to slip, and Salmonici, sure of victory, sprang upon him, but to his surprise he found himself locked in a grip of iron.

"Well done, Will!" shouted the outlaw chief.

"Hold him!" Friar Tuck shrieked. "By St. Giles, whose bones are those I hear cracking? This is splendid. Stick to him, Will, or never look me in the face again."

These words fell on deaf ears, so far as Will Scarlet was concerned. He had quite enough to look after himself without paying heed to other people, for Salmonici, writhing and wriggling like an eel, was working his right arm slowly up the forester's back with the view of getting it round his neck.

Their legs were locked together, and with their heels jammed into the yielding earth, they stood as firm as rocks.

Neither spoke. Breath, nerve, tact, and strength were all wanted now, for the crisis was at hand.

The spectators looked on, craning their necks in anxious silence.

How would it end? The men were so equal in skill and strength that it was impossible to tell.

The suspense was awful to Friar Tuck. Like the rest, he loved the sturdy, honest-hearted lad, and it was almost death to the friar to think that he might be thrown. His great, round face lost its colour and became studded with beads of perspiration, and his convulsively working hands tore up the grass.

"Now," someone seemed to say, in a hoarse whisper.

There came into Will Scarlet's body a wrenching movement that went from his heels to his head, and then Salmonici, uttering a cry of dismay, went whirling upwards.

Will Scarlet mercifully caught him as he fell, or the man's neck might have been broken.

The exultation of Robin Hood and his followers knew no bounds.

Starting up they cheered until the welkin rang.

"Brave Will Scarlet!" gasped Friar Tuck, "I hold you in higher esteem than a thousand Balaams, justly proud as I am of that lovely creature."

"Do you confess yourself beaten?" Will Scarlet demanded as he assisted Salmonici to rise. "Yes, so be it. Well, give me your hand, and I'll press it."

With a sickly smile on his face, Salmonici staggered to a tree and, sitting down, nursed his aching arms upon his knees.

"Never, I confess," he said, "did I ever feel such a grip. I was in a vice. Sir, you are as tough and strong as any oak in this vast forest. I cry your pardon for making light of so noble a foe."

"'Tis pity," Robin Hood observed, when he had done shaking hands with Will Scarlet, "that such a man as you should serve a villain like De Burgh."

"A slave has no choice."

"A slave?"

"Yes, I am his bondsman," Salmonici replied.

"Then be one of my free men, and learn better manners than to take part in the burning of Saxon homes."

"Are you in earnest?" the Greek asked with glistening eyes.

"So much so that I forgive you your share of to-day's evil work, and here is my hand upon it."

Salmonici rose stiffly as Robin Hood advanced.

"I will serve you well," he said, "and be more useful to you than you wot of. I was Oswald de Burgh's bondsman, but in such hatred have I always held him that I have often sworn to take his life."

"Leave that to me," Robin Hood said. "I claim the sheriff as my own property. Heaven! I'll not treat him with as much leniency as I'd extend to a mad hound. But enough of this, or I shall fall into gloom again. It is now time that I thought of William Fleetfoot."

"Spare him!" the Greek pleaded. "He is but a poor slave, such as I was."

"He shall keep his life; but I will see how he can run," Robin Hood replied.

The outlaw crossed over to Friar Tuck and whispered a few words in his ear.

"Grand! beautiful!" the friar said, wagging his head from side to side. "It can be done easily. Let him go, and you shall see some fun."

"Go whichever way you will," Robin Hood said, turning again to Fleetfoot. "No arrow shall speed after you; but still there is danger unless you make the best of your time."

The Norman looked perplexed. There was nothing in sight likely to harm him, but it was not the time to parley or dally. Throwing off his leather jerkin and cap, he stood ready for flight.

"Go!" cried Robin Hood.

Away went Fleetfoot with the swiftness of the wind; but he had not gone far when he heard something scampering in the rear.

Glancing over his shoulder he saw Balaam, head down, ears pricked straight up, and tail as stiff as an oaken staff.

"Mercy on me!" Fleetwood gasped. "The beast has gone mad!"

Putting forth every ounce of his strength he raced on, but Balaam was a good stayer and gained perceptibly on him.

Shouts of encouragement to the donkey and roars of laughter made the air rock, and culminated in one yell of delight as Balaam rolled the Norman head over heels and brayed triumphantly.

"The victory is complete," Robin Hood said. "Fleetfoot will have more news to take to Oswald de Burgh. We have done a good day's work, and will now return. See to the horses there, and bring one for Swayes. His wife and child can ride in front of him. Ho, for the cave and greenwood tree!"

CHAPTER 3.

Captured for Ransom.—Will Scarlet's Great Resolve.

THE sun had sunk so low as to leave but a faint glimmer of light on the trees when Robin Hood and his followers came within a mile of their mysterious home.

To the outlaw chief's surprise, he suddenly saw the two hounds, Vulcan and Hector, racing towards him.

"They are the messengers of something of no ordinary kind," he said anxiously. "What, in the name of Heaven, can have happened during my absence?"

His suspense soon came to an end; for Maid Marian, accompanied by two foresters, soon followed.

Throwing the reins loosely on her horse's neck, she flung up her arms with a gesture of despair at the sight of Robin Hood.

"Love of my life!" the latter cried as he spurred forward, "tell me what has brought you here in such haste and terror?"

"Martha!" exclaimed Maid Marian, panting for breath.

"What of her?" Robin Hood demanded, throwing himself out of the saddle. "Speak out, Maid Marian, but calmly. It is not like you to talk so wildly and look so distraught."

"She left the cave soon after noon-tide," Maid Marian said, "saying that she would keep in sight of it. Her head ached, and she wanted air; and I, seeing no harm, let her go."

"Well?" said Robin Hood.

"I have not seen her since," Maid Marian replied. "She has mysteriously disappeared, and I have sought her everywhere, but in vain. Ah! woe is me! Why did I let her go out of my sight?"

"Will Scarlet," said Robin Hood, "you hear?"

"Yes," Scarlet responded chokingly; "I hear, but it is passing strange to me."

"And to all of us!" Maid Marian wailed. "We heard no cry; we can find no sign of a struggle. It is more like a horrid dream than a reality."

"Gone! Martha gone!" Will Scarlet groaned, clasping his brow. "I see it all. Some sneaking Normans have carried her off, and she is lost to me for ever!"

"Courage, lad—courage!" Friar Tuck whispered in his ear. "Don't give way. It may not be half so bad as you think. Martha may have wandered into the wrong path and lost her way."

"What think you, Maid Marian?" Will Scarlet said. "Tell me, with your truthful lips, your thoughts."

Maid Marian remained silent for some moments, and then burst into tears.

"She thinks as you think," Robin Hood said. "Maid Marian fears the worst. But, listen to me, Will Scarlet. This must be borne, and manfully, too."

But Will Scarlet was unmanned for the moment, and dropped his sorrow-stricken face on his chief's shoulder.

"What, comrade!" Robin Hood cried, "all the evils that ever befell a man were not worth such tears as these. Come! rouse yourself. Make an effort to calm your heart. You, Will, who scorn the very mention of fear—you, brave and cool in the heat of battle—you, who laugh at wounds and sneer in the grinning face of death, shed tears like a child. They are not worthy of you!"

"'Fore Heaven, they are, though!" Little John said, stepping forward. "Robin Hood, I have seen you weep for the loss of one whom you will never see again on earth. Let Will Scarlet weep. The tears will relieve him and cleanse his heart."

"Trouble not about me," Will Scarlet said, sweeping his hand across his eyes, "I am myself again. Tell me where I can go—what I can do."

"That is a question for all of us," Robin Hood replied. "Trust me, if men of Norman blood have carried the maiden off, they shall suffer. But let us get where we can talk without fear of being heard. Oswald de Burgh is getting cunning, and I must see to clearing the forest of his spies."

Not a moment was lost. A council was held in the cave, but it came to nothing. There was not the slightest

clue as to what had become of the missing girl.

The man left on sentry declared that Martha, singing merrily, had passed along a path leading to the top of that cave, but from that moment she disappeared.

Robin Hood threw out scouts in all directions, and his messengers went from place to place, rousing up the foresters.

In the heart of the forest was a hermitage, the occupant of which had been dead some years, and it was seldom used, save when Friar Tuck found himself belated.

The place had the evil reputation of being haunted, and few of the simple-minded peasants ventured near it after dark; but the friar had no fear of ghosts, and many a long night through had he slept within its crumbling walls.

And thither the old man went sorrowing now.

Balaam knew that something was the matter, and hung his head and drooped his tail between his haunches.

Friar Tuck could not tell why he wended his way towards the hermitage. A spirit in his feet seemed to guide him, and as the ghostly-looking building with its bell turret loomed out of the darkness he dismounted and, patting Balaam's nose affectionately, walked slowly to the door.

It stood ajar, one of the rusty hinges having come off since his last visit.

Friar Tuck had the materials with him for procuring a light. They consisted of pieces of flint, steel, and tinder. When sparks set the tinder smouldering a breath was sufficient to set it glowing into a flame, and a few dry sticks, or anything that came to hand, would do the rest.

As the friar groped his way into the hermitage, with his hands in advance, it suddenly occurred to him that Martha might be there, after all, since lost people hide in all sorts of out-of-the-way places in their fright.

Setting to work, he got a light, but although there was no sign of the girl, yet, on turning again to the door, he saw something that made him jump in his sandals.

Before his eyes, nailed to the door, was a piece of parchment, and on it was writing beginning with, "To Robin Hood, the Arch-Rebel," and signed by Oswald de Burgh.

"This will explain all, methinks," said Friar Tuck.

Scraping together a heap of dry leaves which had blown in, and piling on some sticks, Friar Tuck had soon more than sufficient light to see.

Thus ran the document, worded as haughtily as if it had come from King Richard himself:

"To ROBIN HOOD, THE ARCH-REBEL,— Forasmuch as we, having the keeping of the peace at our command, and empowered to deal with all felonies, murders, and rebellious acts, have sent vainly to you to surrender. And since your desire is to continue your evil acts, and lead others to do likewise, we hit on a plan that may bring you to the sense of your great iniquities. For such purpose we have taken and do hold in ransom a certain maiden, and shall not release her until you come before us with six of your band, bringing with you also all goods, jewels, gems, and moneys wrongfully taken by you from peaceful Norman. (Signed)

"OSWALD DE BURGH,
"Lord and Sheriff of Nottingham."

Friar Tuck threw a few more sticks on the fire, and then began to whistle softly.

"Peaceful Normans, by St. Nicholas! Peaceful cutthroats and robbers!" he said. "Well, it is a relief to know as much. Ho, ho! I can fancy Robin Hood bending his neck to this purse-proud churl! But I'll away, and—The saints defend me! what is that?"

It was only Balaam, who, tired of waiting and tempted by the light of the fire, had taken the liberty to put his head in at the door and snort in the most terrifying fashion.

"Monster, and son of a fiend with four legs!" Friar Tuck cried as his fright dispelled. "If I did my duty I'd crack your skull with my quarter-staff; but I want your strength to carry me back to Robin Hood, and since I

have heard so much of your voice, let others hear it, too."

Hiding the scroll under his cassock, the jolly monk rolled on to the donkey's back, and, trusting to that sagacious animal, returned at a pace which shook every bone in his body.

But Friar Tuck cared nothing for that, and although he was more dead than alive by the time that he fell at Robin Hood's feet, he was satisfied, for he had done his duty.

No sooner did the outlaw chief read Oswald de Burgh's insolent message than he mounted his horse and, dashing into the forest, called in his men.

"We must fight cunning with cunning," he said, addressing them in a solemn tone of voice. "If we go to Nottingham in a body we shall be outwitted, for the castle is strong, and is full of men. We have seen inside those walls, but under different circumstances than now, and must therefore be wary if we wish to succeed."

"By Mars, yes!" Little John said. "Oswald de Burgh expects that you will answer in person. If he even dreams of attack he will wreak vengeance on Martha."

In the meanwhile Salmonici, the Greek, was whispering to Will Scarlet, whose face now and then lighted up with a strange, wistful look.

"The Greek knows a secret way into the castle," Will Scarlet said. "Let me go single-handed, and I trow that I shall find my way safely out with my love again."

"Alone, yes—but not alone," Robin Hood replied. "We'll follow on in twos and threes. 'Tis market-day in Nottingham to-morrow, and there will be many other strangers besides us."

"I'd not send too many, good Robin," Little John said. "These Normans will scrutinise every face, and scent danger like foxes. As I cannot shorten my stature, I must, alack! remain here, and Friar Tuck is too well known to show himself."

"Yet, I'll swear that I shall not be far away," the friar remarked. "Will Scarlet, be careful. Once within those walls, torture and death await you, if captured."

"What of that?" Will demanded. "Can I think of risk while my darling is in the power of such a wretch as Oswald de Burgh?"

"Go, then, Will, and Heaven be with you!" said Robin Hood. "What of this secret passage?"

"It is approached under the moat," Salmonici explained. "I have given Will Scarlet full instructions."

"Out of evil cometh good," said Robin Hood. "Had we not captured you and made you our friend, I scarcely know what we should have done in such an extremity as this. I'll send thirty men to escort you home."

"If I live," Will Scarlet said, resignedly. "If I must die, Martha shall die with me, rather than remain at the Castle of Nottingham."

"Amen!" said Friar Tuck. "Martha would agree joyfully to that, I feel certain."

Having taken a few things in his wallet, Will Scarlet started on horseback, stating where the animal would be found in the morning.

Reluctantly enough he left his trusty bow and quiver behind, but there was no other choice, for the bow would not only be in his way, but make him the target for suspicion. He was, therefore, only armed with sword and dagger, both of which he was master in the use of.

Mile upon mile he rode, with nothing to guide him but the stars peeping above the tree-tops, but so keen were his eyes that he never once swerved out of the right direction.

When within five miles of the city he left his horse with a friendly cotter and set out on foot.

On one side of Nottingham the forest ended so abruptly that the trees ended almost where the houses began.

The branches of a huge oak spread half over the stable-yard of Ye Minstrel Inn, and Will Scarlet had to stoop lest he should be lifted clean off his feet.

Ye Minstrel Inn stood just beyond the city walls, the gates of which were promptly closed at the sound of the curfew bell, but young Scarlet made light of the thought of scaling the walls

at any point he set his mind upon. He was, however, not at all sure of his reception at the inn.

The hour was late. The curfew commanded all fires to be extinguished, and strangers were viewed in none too genial a light when most people were in bed asleep.

Undaunted by these difficulties, Will Scarlet hammered boldly at a low, arched door.

It opened presently, and out of it came the blade of a sword, inch by inch, slowly but threateningly.

Will Scarlet, wondering at such a precaution, stood aside until the sword was clear of the door and a thick-set, round-headed man stepped out.

"What do you take me to be—a murderer?" Will Scarlet demanded.

"I thought it was Hugh Crunden," the man said. "By Pluto! if he comes spying here again, I'll stick this blade into him!"

"As Hugh Crunden and I are strangers, I have naught to do with the business between you and him. Let me pass. I am weary, and in need of rest and refreshment."

"Hugh Crunden," said the host, still barring the way, "fetches and carries news for Oswald de Burgh. He has been here to-night, peeping into my customer's faces, until I could hardly keep my hands off him. I thought he had come back again. Lucky for him that he has not, for I'd have found him a six-foot freehold in the forest, and left him there."

"Which shows that you have not much love for the Normans," Will Scarlet remarked.

The landlord of Ye Minstrel Inn started, and then, leaning on his sword, he said:

"I know not who you are. Perhaps you are a spy, too."

"Edwin Sargode has more of the Saxon ring about it than Norman," Will Scarlet said.

"You have my name pat enough, and yet you are a stranger to me," Sargode said, in a puzzled tone of voice.

"Let me come in, and I'll not be long a stranger to you," Will Scarlet replied. "The good monks of St. An-

selm's taught you to read, write, and spell."

"They did," rejoined the host, still puzz'ed.

"Well, then, let me try you with R-o-b-i-n."

Edwin Sargode waited to hear no more, but, almost dragging Will Scarlet into the room, closed the door.

"You are welcome," Sargode said. "I have not seen honest Robin Hood for many a day. How goes it with Little John, Friar Tuck, and all the rest?"

"They are well. I am Will Scarlet."

"And welcome you are. I might have guessed your name by the band across your doublet. How knew you that I had moved from one side of the city to the other?"

"Salmonici, the wrestler, told me," Will Scarlet replied.

Sargode's face darkened, and his eyebrows grew closer together.

"How came you to meet Salmonici? You must beware of him because—"

"He will do us no further harm, but all the good he can," said Will Scarlet, interposing. "Let me explain."

"Come down below," said Sargode, lifting a trap-door as he spoke. "I have lamp and firelight and good cheer there. Salmonici your friend? It sounds impossible!"

"You will find it true enough."

With food and a jug of good, sound ale before him, Will told his story from beginning to end, without a word of interruption from Sargode, who only sat still and wagged his head and rubbed his hands upon his knees.

"By Bacchus!" he said when Will Scarlet had finished, "I never heard the like of this; you are the bravest of the brave. But listen to me: it may be easy to gain an entrance to the castle by the secret passage, but I fear it will be hard work to find a way out."

"I have reckoned all the chances and risks," Will Scarlet replied; "but go I must, were they a thousand times as many."

Sargode tapped his brow and nodded.

"I understand," he said; "there is a maid in the question. I've heard tell of strange things happening to-day—of

troopers riding at breakneck speed and clustering together, thinking to hide a muffled form."

"By Heaven! you set my blood on fire!" Will Scarlet exclaimed, starting to his feet.

"Keep it cool if you wish to succeed," Sargode said. "Sit down, and let us talk the matter over. The wrestler gave away his secret, but let me tell you that the moment you set foot in the streets of Nottingham the hawks will pounce on you and pluck your pinions."

"I am going to make the venture this very night," Will Scarlet said.

"I expected nothing else; but the danger is none the less. There are men in the streets by night as well as by day."

"What would you have me do?" Will Scarlet demanded.

Sargode drank deeply before replying. Then he began to chuckle softly, and, rising, crossed the cellar and tapped his knuckles on a barrel.

It gave forth a hollow, empty sound.

"Oswald de Burgh is very clever," he said, "but he does not know everything. His men have paid me several visits, but they did not find this out. Look!"

He touched a spring, and the head of the barrel fell backwards.

"Here's a fine place to hide in," Sargode said. "I show it to you because I love Robin Hood and all his merry men."

Leaving the head of the barrel open, he came back and sat down again.

"Beyond that," he said, pointing to the cavity, "is a secret passage. It passes under two streets and ends at the house of one Arthur Claxton, who, as you may guess, is friendly with me."

The innkeeper started chuckling again, and Will Scarlet sat listening in mute amazement.

"I'll go with you presently," Sargode said at length, "and Claxton will tell you and show you more than the Greek wrestler ever dreamed of, although in due time you will come to the secret passage he spoke of. I am ready. Follow me."

Will Scarlet felt like a hound strain-

ing at the leash, but his friend was as cool as a cucumber.

Sargode led the way, crawling through the barrel, and after Will Scarlet had followed he crawled back and closed the head.

"Now for a light," he said.

The blackness was so pitch-like that Will Scarlet did not know that Sargode was near him until he felt his hand on his shoulder.

The Saxon innkeeper lit a torch and took the lead again.

There was plenty of room to walk upright in, and, but for the earthy smell, the passage resembled the corridor of a castle.

"This was made when the Danes were ruining our country with fire and sword," Sargode explained. "But let us get on, for Arthur Claxton does not keep late hours."

Suddenly the innkeeper stopped and held the flaming torch above his head.

They had arrived at the foot of a short flight of stone steps, and Will Scarlet's guide, running up them, pulled a cord, and the sound of a bell came dully.

"Who's there?" demanded a voice from above.

"Good wine needs no bush," Sargode replied.

Almost instantly a board slid in a groove, and a man looked down.

"What now?" he said. "In another minute I should have been in bed. But what is this? You are not alone."

"No; I bring with me one of Robin Hood's men."

"If that be so," Claxton responded. "he is welcome; but if he comes with a lying tale, better for him that he had never been born."

Claxton held a lamp in his hand, and the light made his long, yellow beard shine like gold. He was a tall, powerful man, dressed in a doublet and leggings of skins, lending him an almost savage appearance.

"Come, then," he said, "and welcome!"

The small, square, stone-walled room was a perfect armoury. There were long-bows and cross-bows, swords and shields, halberds and axes.

As Will Scarlet gave Claxton his hand he guessed the truth. This place was where the oppressed Saxon inhabitants of Nottingham met, and any hour the outbreak against the oppressors might take place.

Quickly Will Scarlet told Claxton what had brought him to Nottingham, but it appeared to be no news to the great, bearded, rugged-featured man.

"I must hasten my arrangements," he muttered to himself. "I did not think that the tree had grown sufficiently tough, but we must use it while it is green."

Then, smiling into Will Scarlet's face, he said:

"Expect every assistance from me. It is well that you came alone, for Oswald de Burgh is on the alert. I have a plan of the castle which I will give you, and I have marked with a cross the room in which the maiden is locked."

"What is this you tell me?" Will Scarlet demanded, starting.

"That I have been in Nottingham Castle this very night," Claxton replied. "I am often there, preparing a surprise for the base Normans, but I have stayed my hand, not wishing to shed the blood of too many good Saxons."

"You tell me wonders," exclaimed the young forester.

"And yet the simple truth," Claxton rejoined. "I'll tell you more. You need not enter the streets to pass under the moat and enter the secret passage Salmonici told you of."

Will Scarlet's face bore so puzzled an expression at this moment that Sargode threw his head back and roared with laughter.

"Not so loud," said Claxton, reprovingly, "or the sound of your guffaws may penetrate through the earth. Now, young sir, listen to me. Rest here to-night, and start on your adventure to-morrow. I will bid you go at the right time."

"Must I wait?"

"Yes. The maiden will come to no harm. Oswald de Burgh holds her as ransom, believing that he has captured Maid Marian, and that death itself will

not prevent Robin Hood from coming in person to save her."

"I see the mistake now," Will said. "Well, here I am, in your hands. Help me, and advise me for the best I know you will, and so I am content."

"Leave him with me," Claxton said, holding out his hand to Sargode. "The cattle must be herded to-morrow. You understand?"

Sargode made a curious sign with the fingers of his right hand, and, bidding Will Scarlet good-night, departed the way he came.

Claxton said but little more: but mounting a short ladder fastened flat to the wall, he passed through a trap-door into an upper room, and presently a large roll of skins came tumbling down.

"I will call you when it is time to break your fast," was all he said as he closed the trap. "Sleep well. Rest easy. Heaven is on the side of right, though might may seem to flourish."

CHAPTER 4.

A Daring Rescue.

EARLY in the morning Will Scarlet started. Directed by Claxton, he passed under the moat through a fearsome passage that oozed with slime and icy water. Now and then toads of a size that sent a shudder through him waddled away at his approach, but he encountered no more harmful thing. He carried a lamp with a floating wick, and the flickering light brought forth fantastic and hideous shadows.

But Will Scarlet had no time to be afraid of such things. He had a perilous adventure in hand that required nerve and courage. He went straight on, and now he stood listening, for overhead there came a rumbling noise like distant thunder. Though he knew it not, it was the tramp of armed men, assembled in the courtyard for their daily exercise.

Every morning Oswald de Burgh paraded his henchmen and received the reports from his spies. They had not brought him any reassuring news. Robin Hood was on the warpath again, and more than a score Normans had met their doom in Sherwood Forest.

But the sheriff felt certain of success. He had sent to London for aid, and Prince John had promised him sufficient men to scour the forest from end to end.

Oswald de Burgh had made one great hit. Under lock and key was Maid Marian, at least so he thought, and he looked forward to seeing Robin Hood bending his knee to him and crying mercy for his sweetheart.

Little did he dream of the lonely man burrowing under the ground, stopping at intervals to examine a piece of parchment, the key to success or death.

On and on Will Scarlet went, now up, now down, but at length his journey, so far as the secret passage was concerned, came to an end. By degrees it had narrowed, so that his arms rubbed against the sides. At length he came to a beam, and saw it plainly enough, for daylight was shining upon it. Below the beam was a flue-like space, and a small room filled with odds and ends, which had been thrown in from time to time. There were pieces of rusty armour, fragments of decayed tapestry, and broken swords and daggers.

It was no part of the castle where the men lived that Will Scarlet found himself in. There were no signs of anyone having been there for a considerable period. The door had fallen from its hinges and lay upon the floor, and some bats, half-blinded by the light, flopped about with awkward and uncertain movements.

And now, with his heart almost in his mouth, but ready to fight to the bitter end, Will Scarlet consulted the piece of parchment for the last time.

"Corridor to the right, after that to the left, and then first door," he repeated to himself.

No sound greeted his ears, and breaking into a voiceless run he reached the cell in which Martha was imprisoned.

"Sweetheart," he said, "I have come to save you. For the love of Heaven and your own hope of liberty, utter no sound!"

Taking a short steel bar, finely tempered and sharpened, he thrust it between the door and the lintel and exerted all his strength.

The bar seemed to bend under the tremendous pressure he put upon it, but though the lock creaked and the woodwork groaned the door held fast.

"Great Heavens! have I come here for naught?" Will Scarlet gasped as streams of perspiration ran down his face.

"One effort more," a voice seemed to whisper in his ear.

He made it, with the veins of his forehead standing out as though they would burst, and succeeded.

In another moment Martha was in his arms. One kiss and that was all. Neither spoke, for now the castle seemed full of sounds. Something had happened, but what they could not, dare not guess.

But surely all this noise was not confined to the interior of the castle. It seemed as though there was a great clamour at the gates, but it was all nothing to the two lovers. They must go, and quickly, too.

Still silent, Will Scarlet, seizing Martha's hand, hurried her into the gloomy corridor. The sky had become overcast, and the sudden darkness of storm clouds had fallen upon the earth. Scarcely a glimmer of light shone through the loop-holed walls, but it was not far to the entrance to the secret passage.

"Courage, sweetheart," he whispered. "We shall soon be out of all danger."

The girl was trembling violently, and walked with such faltering steps that her lover grew impatient.

"Quicker! Quicker!" he said.

And then he stopped and grew sick and giddy, for an awful thing had happened. By some unaccountable mistake he had taken the wrong turning, and stood beneath an archway, with a broad flight of stairs beyond.

Bad as was the light, Martha saw by his face what had happened. She was but a woman, her heart failed her, and she sank fainting on Will Scarlet's arm.

In catching her his foot had kicked up against a broken halberd, and he seized it, for now those sounds he had heard in the castle became louder. There were men on the way to take

Martha from her cell, perhaps to slay her, for the clamour outside increased in volume, and Will Scarlet thought he heard "Justice for Saxons!" shouted several times.

It was an awful position.

Still supporting Martha, Will Scarlet loosened his sword and kicked it behind him, lest it should get in his way, for the broken halberd was much the better weapon on the stairhead.

"Heaven be merciful!" he cried as he heard the door below fly open with a crash. "I am not afraid to die, but deliver not this poor girl into the hands of the enemy."

The Normans heard the voice, and shouted with savage glee.

"Ho!" cried one. "A Saxon fox has found his way into the castle and secured a chicken. Cut the slave down, but save the woman."

Confident of hewing the forester down they came clattering up the stairs sword in hand.

Will Scarlet measured his distance, and struck with might and main. He heard the halberd crash through a helmet, and heard the death-cry of the man who had received the terrific blow. And then, with a red mist gathering before his eyes, he struck again and again, until his arm had no more power to lift the notched and bent weapon.

One more blow! It fell on himself, and he dropped like a stone, carrying the inanimate form of his sweetheart with him.

Yet, even as he fell, he thought he heard rough but cheery voices.

When he opened his eyes he saw by the light of a torch, instead of exultant Normans, Sargode and Claxton bending over him, and another man holding Martha in his arms.

"Speak low," Claxton whispered; "we followed you through the secret passages, and arrived in the nick of time. You had already accounted for three of the Normans, and we made short work of the others."

"Heaven bless you for this," Will Scarlet replied. "How can I repay you?"

"By saying nothing about it," Sargode said, handing him a leather flask.

"Drink some of this cordial; it will put new life in your veins."

"Where are we?" Will Scarlet demanded when he had drunk some of the liquor.

"Not very far from my house," Claxton responded. "We have had some trouble in bringing you two along. Will," he added, laughing, "it was lucky that you got the flat of the sword instead of the edge, or Robin Hood would be mourning the loss of one of his men. Martin!"

"I hear you," said the man in attendance on Martha.

"How fares it with the maiden?"

"As well as can be," Martin replied. "It is just as well that she is still insensible. Poor child!"

"Come, then," said Claxton, "a few more steps, and we shall be where Oswald de Burgh and all his hirelings can never find us. Death seize the wretch, if it has not already overtaken him!"

"What! has the castle, then, been stormed?" asked Will Scarlet.

"No; but something almost better has happened. Mad with rage, Oswald de Burgh issued forth, and is even now engaged in the street. We will see how it works out. I called the Saxons to arms, and, by the rood! they will hold their own."

"And Robin Hood?" said the young forester inquiringly.

"Is leading the Saxons with a picked band of his own men. But, quick! We'll leave the maiden with Martin and see how matters are faring outside."

CHAPTER 5.

Oswald de Burgh in a Trap.

At the time that Will Scarlet was making his way to Nottingham Castle there ran into the streets several men uttering mystic words and giving signs to others, and soon the city was in an uproar.

The rising of the Saxons came like the bursting of a summer tempest. The thunder of angry voices rolled from street to street, and the Norman population, trembling in their shoes, locked and bolted their doors.

"Armed men only," cried a man. "Harm no others! Protect women and children!"

Who but Robin could utter such noble words? Surrounded by a score of his sturdiest men, he led the crowd of Saxons, ready to lay down their lives for liberty.

They knew now what had happened. They had heard how Martha had been basely abducted from the forest, and, grinding their teeth, they swore that if Oswald de Burgh did not come forth and meet them in open battle they would burn the castle down.

As has been stated, Nottingham Castle was strongly garrisoned, for Oswald de Burgh was making preparations to crush Robin Hood and the discontented foresters for ever. But the sheriff had reckoned without his host. Little did he dream that the Saxon artisans would rise against him. Grumble they always did, but he had let them grumble, believing that his spies were acquainted with everything that was going on.

Never did man make a greater mistake.

Before the people, rendered savage by oppression, poured like a living torrent into the streets Claxton's armoury was emptied, and so with long-bows, cross-bows, halberds, bills, and spears, the so-called rebels marched to the castle.

Oswald de Burgh ran to the top of the keep and looked over, and his face grew black with rage when he recognised Robin Hood. Then it struck him that something was transpiring in the castle as well as beyond the walls, and he sent a number of men to scour the vast buildings. How some of them fared we have already seen.

From his point of elevation Oswald de Burgh could count the number of Robin Hood's regular followers. He knew them by their doublets of Lincoln green. The others he accounted as mere rabble, and at the word of command his archers swarmed upon the walls.

In those days there were two kinds of arrows used, one called flight, the other sheaf. The first named was lightly feathered with a small head; the latter

was highly feathered, short shafted, and broad headed.

Flight arrows, such as Robin Hood and his merry men used, were shot from the bow at a good distance; they would pierce armour and kill a man at three hundred yards.

The Norman archers were not renowned as marksmen, and generally contented with using the sheaf arrows, deadly only in a close fight; thus the Saxons had a decided advantage over them.

The din was tremendous, and flight arrows dropping among the Normans began to play havoc. In vain they twanged their bows. Their arrows fell short, and were hailed with shouts of derision.

The cross-bow men could do but little

These were rather cumbersome weapons, and took time to discharge, and so the Saxons were having it pretty well their own way, and Oswald de Burgh was swearing by everything he could think of to have a bitter revenge.

"Where are the citizens of our own blood?" he bellowed. "How comes it that they do not issue forth to cut this rabble down? Have they forgotten how their grandsires fought and conquered at Hastings? Cowards all! May perdition take them this very day!"

But rage will not win any kind of battle, and Oswald de Burgh, calming down, bade his harassed archers hide behind the battlements while he consulted his officers.

Protected by a favisher, the bearer of a large shield, the sheriff was retiring, when his men set up a terrible shout.

"The Saxons are bringing faggots to the outer gates," one cried, turning to Oswald de Burgh. "Once down, they will find means to cross the moat, burn the drawbridge, and the flames will find way through portcullis and lodge."

Oswald de Burgh was on the horns of a dilemma. Though the castle walls were of solid stone, there was an immense quantity of woodwork within; old beams, oak ceilings, which, once alight, would burn and crumple like parchment.

As he stood speechless with fury and

astonishment at the audacity of the Saxons, news was brought him that six of his men were found slain in the castle itself.

Oswald de Burgh's heart gave a great leap, and then all his blood seemed to rush from his body. Not only was the castle besieged, but, as he thought, there was an armed force within the walls.

How any of his foes had contrived to gain an entrance did not affect him, then. He must fight, openly and boldly, or die.

Few and short were the orders that he gave.

Archers, men-at-arms, went thundering down to the courtyard; the portcullis was raised, the drawbridge came swooping down, and the sheriff, leaping upon his horse, went forth to crush the Saxons.

The Normans were received with yells of delight.

"We have them now," Robin Hood cried. "Strike, Saxons, and strike hard. Sweet liberty or death! Remember the burning homesteads! Remember the murdered women and children! Think of the tortures your fathers suffered; the insults offered to your mothers! No Normans! England for the blood that drove out the Danes! No Normans!"

They answered him with a shout that rang through the length and breadth of Nottingham and found an echo deep down in the forest beyond.

The Normans plied sword, battle-axe, and lance; the Saxons replied with bow, bill, and halberd.

The first rank of the Normans went down almost to a man, but others, springing over their bodies, fought desperately.

"No quarter to Saxons!" was Oswald de Burgh's command.

"No mercy needed. No quarter to Normans!" Robin Hood shouted back.

Men dropped and died where they fell. Others crawled away, only to return after binding up their wounds, snatching weapons from dead hands, and fighting on and on, until thew and muscle could no longer bear the strain.

Suddenly a young man forced his

way up to Robin Hood and grasped his hand.

"Will Scarlet!" the outlaw exclaimed. "Heaven be praised for this! It does my eyes good to see you again, lad."

"All is well, praise be to noble-hearted friends!" Will Scarlet said. "Martha is safe, and will be at our forest home before sundown."

"We may never live to see it again," Robin Hood said. "But we have left everything in good hands. Stand firm! Look to yourself!"

The next moment they were in the midst of a host of infuriated Normans.

Robin's sword was struck from his hand, but seizing a battle-axe from a man staggering blindly forward, he cleared a circle round him. Then he saw, as through a blood-red mist, Will Scarlet bow his head and drop upon his knees, but the next moment he was up again and fighting for dear life and liberty.

Crouching under the big shield borne by his favisher, Oswald de Burgh watched the tide of battle.

It ebbed and flowed rapidly. Now one side seemed to have the mastery, then the other; but reinforcements for the Normans were arriving.

Prince John had promised to visit the sheriff in the spring, and the advance guard, a strong body of horsemen, were now pouring through the eastern gate.

Robin Hood never lost hope or courage. He saw, however, that the further shedding of blood would be as wicked as useless.

The rebel Saxons had lost twenty men, but they had rendered such a splendid account of themselves that the Normans would hold them in respect, and henceforth the yoke of foreign oppression would rest lighter on their shoulders.

Robin passed the word for them to fall back and return boldly to their homes.

The Saxons of Nottingham had shown their strength. They had taken Oswald de Burgh so completely by surprise that he dared not seek his revenge

openly, but he vowed that there should be a general massacre soon.

Robin Hood and his merry men, not one of whom had fallen, but bore plenty of signs of the fray, made straight for the western gate.

The keeper bolted at their appearance, and the outlaws, making for the forest, were for the time being out of harm's way.

"We brought Norman horses with us," Robin Hood said, "so we shall not feel their loss. It is better that we return on foot, for when darkness comes on and we take to the narrow paths all else but ourselves would be in the way."

It was yet early, and the outlaws expected that they would be pursued by Prince John's men; and so, with all possible speed, they plunged into the densest parts of the forest and made no halt until the intense blue dying out of the sky told that the sun was going down.

There had been a copious rain in the morning, and the earth was now yielding and slippery in places.

In one way this was in the favour of Robin Hood; in another it was against him. The forest was full of little dells, which quickly filled with water, thus hampering the Norman troopers; while, on the other hand, the soft condition of the earth left the footprints of the fugitive foresters.

At length, so worn out that they could scarcely drag their legs over the ground, they came to a standstill as by a preconcerted signal.

Robin Hood's great strength would have served him for quite another hour, but he recognised how cruel it would be to ask his brave men to make another effort.

Camping out in the ordinary manner was not to be thought of. Light a fire they durst not, and of provisions they had so little that when fairly divided there was scarcely sufficient to allay the pangs of hunger.

"What shall we do?" Robin Hood asked of Will Scarlet. "The earth is almost as wet as a pit, and ague will eat its way into my brave men's bones if they fall upon it. And," he added, in a whisper, "I have lost my reckon-

ing, and until the sun rises to guide me I dare not think of moving, for fear of taking a wrong direction."

Will Scarlet leaned his chin on his open hand and thought the matter out.

"Our good friends are accustomed to sleeping almost anywhere," he said at length. "They must take to the trees. Rest you, too, noble chief. I will watch; and fear not but that I will keep my eyes open."

"Tush, lad!" Robin replied. "So little ails me that I am ready for another brush with the Normans if they come this way. I will take first turn and call you when I feel fatigued."

The great trees of the forest were full of forked branches, which the bold foresters knew how to make use of, and a few minutes after Robin Hood had given the word of command he alone stood on the earth, and the rest were sleeping as peacefully as though their heads lay on down pillows.

There was no vestige of the storm left. It had passed away, leaving the sky clear, the air sweet and beautiful.

The voices of men were hushed, but not so those that grow like shadows out of the darkness.

Birds of evil omen, horned beetles, and insects such as the sun never shines upon seek their prey at night. Bats wheeled, owls hooted, the nightjars screeched, and now and then came the faint howling of a wolf—for these brutes had not yet been all cleared from the forest—and the savage and tiger-like snarl of a wild-cat.

But Robin Hood had no ears for such sounds, nor eyes for the ghost-like shadows that came and went as the moon lifted her crescent above the trees.

An hour passed, and all was well; but suddenly there came borne to Robin's ears a sound so faint that it died away on the wings of the soft breeze; but he knew it to be the tramp of horses in the far distance.

The Normans might be abroad, or some travellers might be passing through the forest.

Both ideas were feasible enough, so Robin Hood hesitated to rouse his slumbering men.

Like a statue he stood, listening, his chin resting on the handle of his sword, and every nerve in his body quivering with suppressed excitement.

"Hallo! Hallo!"

The cry came to his ears like an echo, but Robin Hood knew what it meant. Someone was lost in the forest, and if his ears did not deceive him no Saxon either.

"Whoever it is," he thought, straining his ears to catch the next cry which he was sure would follow, "has parted with his fellows. I wonder— But, no. That would be too good even to dream of."

"Hallo! Hallo!"

The voice sounded nearer now, but there was no responsive shout. Wary, and ever on the alert, Robin Hood kept perfectly still.

Perhaps the trick of "lost traveller" was being tried on him, but the outlaw was too old a bird to be caught with such chaff as that. He waited, giving no sign, and, as if fearful that the slightest sound might betray him, scarcely breathed.

A third time came the cry with increased intensity. Judging by the sound of his voice, the wanderer was evidently in a terrible state of mind. He was coming Robin's way, too, and the outlaw, gliding to the tree into which he had seen Will Scarlet climb into one of the lowest forked branches, he touched him gently with the handle of his sword.

Always a light sleeper, Will Scarlet was awake in a moment. In another he was gliding down, and a third brought him to the side of Robin Hood.

"Listen," the latter whispered. "A man, who seems to be leading a horse, is drawing nigh. You are the finest scout among all my splendid lads; go, and see what this stranger is like."

A word from his chief was more than sufficient to Will Scarlet. He took a few steps forward, and then vanished like a shadow.

In less than two minutes he reappeared, and so suddenly as to startle even Robin Hood.

"I have seen him," Will Scarlet said. "Some poor traveller, I suppose?"

"Neither a traveller, nor poor— Oswald de Burgh himself!"

There was just light enough for Will Scarlet to see the effect these words had on Robin Hood. For once the King of Sherwood Forest was so taken by surprise that he was fain to press his hand over his mouth to stifle the cry that rose to his lips. His face underwent a number of changes; exultation, doubt, the longing for revenge, all flitted over his features, until the conflicting emotions passing away left him pale and stern.

"Are you sure?" he whispered.

"Never surer in my life," Will Scarlet replied. "He and his horse are covered with mud, as if just dragged from a quagmire— But hark, the hound is giving music again!"

"Hallo! A man lost! Twenty nobles for a friend and shelter!"

"You shall have both," Robin Hood muttered grimly. "A friend of your victim shall greet you, and he will offer you shelter that will hide you for ever."

The outlaw and Will Scarlet dashed behind a giant oak, and Oswald de Burgh, with his teeth chattering in his head, came slowly on, his horse limping after him.

"Those churls rode on, never missing me," he said aloud. "My curses on the helmets that deafened their ears. I am doomed to wander about until daylight. But why should these fears assail me? Robin Hood must be far away by this time."

"Sheriff," said the King of Sherwood Forest, stepping forward and doffing his plumed cap, "the man you speak of is very much at your service. Hand over your sword and battle-axe, or that arrow drawn to its head by brave Will Scarlet shall pierce your brain. Ho there! Foresters, awake!"

At the loud-spoken order Robin Hood's merry men dropped from the trees like leaves nipped by a frost, but uttered no sound.

As in a dream Oswald de Burgh saw all, and such anguish passed through him that heart and brain seemed fit to burst.

Robin Hood walked up to him and looked full into his eyes.

"So," the outlaw said, "murderer of my father, ruthless villain and coward, we meet face to face again. Blight of the earth, you shall hang near the place I call home, and I'll send your body to Prince John, who, like you, is a born coward and usurper."

Oswald de Burgh passed his mailed hand over the region of his heart; his lips moved, but some moments passed before coherent words came from them.

"Fate is against me," he said, "and since I have fallen into your hands, Robin Hood, it were waste of breath to say anything."

"True," replied the King of Sherwood. "You are said to be a fool as well as a miscreant; but it would seem that you have some sense. You are my prisoner."

Oswald de Burgh gnawed at his moustache as he inclined his head, with some attempt at dignity.

"We will see what death seems to the man who has been so fond of dealing it out to others," Robin Hood said. "Take him from me, men, or I shall strike him dead at my feet and thus rob myself of half my revenge. Will Scarlet, look to him. I leave him in your charge."

To the surprise of the foresters, Robin Hood walked abruptly away. He wanted to be alone. It seemed that he heard his father's voice ringing in his ears, he saw the smoke of burning cottages, and fumes darkening the sky and poisoning the air; he heard the wail of women and children, and saw devastation and destruction where once peace and plenty had been.

And this man, Oswald de Burgh, the cause of all, was now in his hands!

Was it true? Could it be true? Would the sound of a horn, or the deep, rich voices of his men wake him to tell him that it was all a dream?

Robin looked back, and saw Will Scarlet binding Oswald de Burgh to a tree.

Enough! It was no dream, and the outlaw chief was satisfied, but he must not remain there too long.

The sheriff's men were doubtless seeking him at that very moment, and might chance to pass that way.

Robinhood, calm now, strode back and confronted his prisoner.

"Answer my questions without lying," he said, "or I will inflict torture on you such as you have inflicted on others. How many men were with you when Heaven sent you floundering into mud and mire?"

"Just fifty," Oswald de Burgh replied.

"Pshaw!" Robin Hood sneered. "Would that they had come with you, I'd had a grand carnival. Listen! What force did the coward, Prince John, send to your aid?"

"A hundred horse."

Robin Hood saw that Oswald de Burgh was keeping something back.

"A hundred horse would be as nothing!" he cried.

"They were the advance-guard," the sheriff gasped. "Others are to come, and will arrive to-morrow."

"Which means," said the King of Sherwood Forest, "that there will be a general massacre of Saxons at Nottingham?"

Oswald de Burgh bit his tongue and remained silent.

"Silence means yes," Robin Hood said. "Ho there! we must find our way to the cave, and a messenger must reach Nottingham Castle with all despatch. Unbind him from the tree, but keep the cords upon him and watch him closely. Stay, though, yet a moment!"

Robin Hood drew his dagger and placed the point within an inch of Oswald de Burgh's throat.

"Answer this," he said, his eyes gleaming like live coals. "Has the order for the massacre been already given?"

"No, I swear it."

"Your oath is of no account," Robin Hood retorted. "One more question. Where are these strange soldiers?"

"Resting at the castle. They made forced marches, and arrived worn out. I alone have power to order the massacre; I alone the power to stop it."

"Enough," said Robin Hood, "I am fain to believe that you have spoken the truth for once in your life. Forward then!"

CHAPTER 6.

How the Massacre was Stopped.

WILL SCARLET took the lead.

The light of the moon grew stronger every moment, and as luck would have it the clever scout hit upon the right path.

The rest was easily accomplished.

On arriving at a certain part of the forest, Will Scarlet, after exchanging a few words with Robin Hood, suddenly disappeared.

In a few moments they heard him blowing upon his horn, and then, as a low-roofed house came in view, they saw Will and two other men leading out from a fenced-in paddock two horses each.

Oswald de Burgh mounted one, and although allowed the use of his hands he rode with a cord round his neck and Will Scarlet holding the end, quite a sufficient warning to the sheriff not to dream of escape.

Robin Hood rode at the other side, and three foresters brought up the rear.

The remainder trudged sturdily on, breaking into loud shouts of triumph, and singing the songs dear to men of Saxon blood.

Day had not dawned when Little John and Friar Tuck, who had been left at the outlaws' headquarters, were rudely startled by galloping horses.

The giant was on watch some distance from the cave, and the friar was keeping him company and talking gaily to him, for Sargode and Claxton had already arrived with Martha, and had told a story that thrilled the old man's soul with pride.

"Not Normans! Saxons! Sweet liberty or death!" Robin Hood shouted, fearing that Little John might mistake them for enemies and dash in amongst them with his usual impetuosity.

"Whom have you here?" the giant roared.

"Oswald de Burgh," Robin Hood replied.

Little John picked Friar Tuck up in his arms and hugged him in his joy.

"Mercy!" the friar howled. "Would you kill me? Think you that I have the ribs of an ox? And now," he added, as

he went flop on the ground, "the ponderous villain has dropped me!"

But Little John neither heard nor cared. Flinging up his huge arms, he uttered such a bellow of delight that it resounded not only for half a mile through the forest, but into the innermost recesses of the cavern.

In a short time the interior was ablaze with light, and filled with cries of joy.

Leaping from his horse, Robin Hood took Maid Marian in his arms, then Martha, saying:

"Welcome again, lover of a brave man. You must never venture forth again, girl. Take her, Will, and soothe her with the truth that but for her we should not have seen Oswald de Burgh here to-night."

The sheriff looked on gloomily as he stood facing Robin Hood, who, seating himself at a table, called for writing materials.

"Write to my dictation," he said to the prisoner. "'I, Oswald de Burgh, Sheriff of Nottingham, declare that I have fallen in with Robin Hood, and so am I impressed with his bounty and hospitality that I do command no harm shall be done to any Saxon now residing at Nottingham, or the bearer of this. In earnest of this, I append my name and seal.'"

Robin Hood's quick eyes had detected a large signet ring on the sheriff's finger, bearing his coat of arms.

"Take heed," said the outlaw, handing Oswald de Burgh the pen, "that there is no mistake about your signature."

There was, however, little fear of anyone imitating the great scrawling characters, which every man in Nottingham Castle could swear to.

"Will this save my life?" Oswald de Burgh demanded after he had signed.

Robin Hood made no reply, but coolly rolled the parchment up, sealed it with the sheriff's ring, and looked wistfully round at his men.

"I must choose one who has suffered no fatigue to-day," he said. "What now, Will Scarlet, are you mad?"

Will Scarlet had almost snatched the parchment from Robin Hood's hand,

and for a moment the outlaw looked none too pleased.

"Your pardon, chief!" Will Scarlet said. "I did not mean to offend; but since you have done so much for me and the maiden who, Heaven willing, is to be my wife, I implore you let me take this message."

"But you have had only a short rest for many hours," Robin Hood urged. "No, Will, it is too much to ask of you."

At this juncture Friar Tuck stepped forward.

"I am a man of peace, and although I may not be welcome at Nottingham Castle, yet I may act as guide and friend on the way. Robin Hood, let this young man go, and I will attend him. In good truth he is right in what he says. Much has been done for him; let him do a little more for you."

"And so say I," exclaimed Little John, smiting his thigh. "The friar deserves all credit; but forsooth why should he—"

"Let us have no envious feeling here," Robin interrupted, casting an amused glance at the giant. "Little John, I will find you a task after your own heart. You shall have sole charge of Oswald de Burgh. As to you, Will Scarlet," he continued, "I cannot resist the arguments brought to bear on me. Go, and take the good friar with you. He can ride a horse as well as the best of us when the fancy seizes him."

At that moment Balaam, the donkey, lifted up his voice in anger, as if asking what he had done to be left out in the cold.

"Patience, my beloved one," Friar Tuck said. "You have had your share of good things, and will never be forgotten so long as your master has strength enough to rattle a stick on your hide."

Meanwhile, two fresh and highly-spirited horses were being got ready for the journey, and amid a storm of cheering and waving of hands Will Scarlet and Friar Tuck galloped away.

Come what might, Oswald de Burgh's signature would act like a charm with the Normans, and naught else had they to fear. They took the broad bridle-

path, running in almost a direct line through the forest.

They watched how the moon paled and the stars grew faint in the sky as dawn drew nigh. Then the birds, perched on boughs clad with buds of amber, gold, and emerald, sang, and the ever welcome sun rose again to beautify the earth and gladden the hearts of every living thing.

Nottingham at last.

How grand the towers of the castle looked, with the red-roofed houses creeping up to it, as if for shelter and protection.

"By the rood!" quoth Friar Tuck, "if Oswald de Burgh were but a different man, there'd be little misery yonder. Will, lad, you must be sorely tired."

"We'll talk of that when our work is done," Will Scarlet replied. "If you feel no more fatigue than I do, you feel none at all."

"That is always the way with ardent youth," the friar responded, shaking his head. "There cannot be too much excitement, or too much pleasure; but the time will come when you will be glad to be at your ease at times, like me—a man of peace."

"Friar," said Will Scarlet, as the western gate came in view, "I have never heard your age discussed; never heard you speak of it. When is your birthday?"

"I have done with such follies. And as to my age, I have wandered so much out of the reckoning that I can only tell you that I am somewhere between forty and eighty."

"You are a wonderful old man," Will Scarlet remarked.

"No man is old so long as his heart is light and sound," Friar Tuck replied. "To keep your heart thus, your youth must be pure in all things. I lived in such wise, and although the shafts of scandal are sometimes shot at me they fall harmless. Will, trust me, since all good things were sent for the use of man, I do take just a little wine for my infirmities, but it can never be said of me that I neglect my duty," the friar added.

"True for you," said Will Scarlet. "You have no enemy, but had you a

thousand, no man could accuse you of sloth in any sense. But here is the gate, and here is the keeper with his attendants, halberds and all."

"They know us," said Friar Tuck. "See how they glare and make ready. Hail the loons, or they will be for ringing the alarm bell."

"A message from Oswald de Burgh!" Will Scarlet shouted, holding up the scroll.

The gatekeeper and his men stood irresolute; but seeing that Will Scarlet and Friar Tuck had no followers they awaited their approach in silence.

One glance at the seal was sufficient for the keeper of the gate, and he made way instantly.

"I know not what this may mean," he said, with an amazed stare in his eyes; "but it is my duty to let you pass on. Where is our lord and master?"

"Breaking his fast with Robin Hood," Friar Tuck replied. "As to where he may go next is more than you and I can tell. The forest is deep, and so is—"

"Let us get on," Will Scarlet interrupted softly. "Friar, you let your tongue run too freely. Those men are not such fools that we can afford to poke fun at them."

"Then, my faith! they carry not their wisdom in their faces," Friar Tuck replied. "Ho, ho! Nottingham Castle looks, methinks, all the grander for being without its master."

The two rode on until Will Scarlet said:

"Pull up; here is the outer lodge, and Normans armed at all points to greet us."

"How now, knaves?" cried one man, clad in Milan mail. "Have you come to pick out your gibbets? If so, we can show you plenty of timber that will serve for the purpose."

"Knaves in your teeth, popinjay!" exclaimed Friar Tuck. "What! durst you address a father of the Holy Church in such terms?"

"You look more like an overfed yeoman than a priest," said the soldier.

"Have done with all folly," Will Scarlet said. "See here this scroll, bearing the seal of Oswald de Burgh.

Take it to your chief officer, and tell him that we wait here while he digests it."

"My faith!" Friar Tuck muttered under his breath. "Methinks that it will lie somewhat heavy on his chest."

The soldier altered his tone and demeanour immediately.

"I see by your face that you are Saxons, and such your tongues proclaim you to be," he said. "All night long our lord and master has been sought, and now you bring news of him under his own seal. Will you not come in and rest?"

"Friend," quoth Friar Tuck, with twinkling eyes, "I have lived so long in the open air that I would fain remain in it now."

"And so say I," Will Scarlet added. "When we have the chief officer's reply we will rest awhile, but not where key can be turned on us."

The Normans knew not what to make of the matter, and while the message was being delivered they stood within the gate, some with drawn swords and others with halberds ready to charge.

Presently Oswald de Burgh's steward, clad in black-corded silk pointed with silver, came hurrying across the drawbridge. Such a message as he had read, and he could not doubt the genuineness of it, had almost deprived him of breath.

"This reads fair enough," he gasped, saluting the friar first and then Will Scarlet; "but it says nothing of where my lord is."

"The message was hurriedly written," Will Scarlet replied. "I have only one question to ask: Will it be obeyed to the letter?"

"Oh, beyond a doubt! What man would dare dispute my lord's word? But where is he?"

"It is not my business to tell you," said Will Scarlet.

"In that case I may deem it my duty to detain you until my lord returns," the steward said.

Will Scarlet and Friar Tuck at once jumped off their horses.

"Here we are, then," said Will; "order your men to seize us, and give the signal, not only for the death of

Oswald de Burgh, but for a rising among the peasantry from the confines of Northumberland to where the sea washes the rugged coast of Cornwall. We are here, and unattended, so use your power as you may see fit."

The steward was in a state hovering between perplexity and despair.

"Listen!" he said. "This is my lord's writing, but the wording of it puzzles my brain. Oswald de Burgh, Robin Hood's guest, and praising him!"

"If the message reads so, why doubt it, man?" Friar Tuck demanded.

"Because," replied the steward, "I think that Oswald de Burgh must have been mad when he wrote such words and put his signature to them. But wait, I will pen a reply, stating that I have received my lord's command, and then you shall go your way in peace."

"If you had your way," muttered Friar Tuck, nodding his head at the steward as he hastened back to the castle, "we should go our way in pieces!"

By this time a small crowd of people had gathered round, but Will Scarlet could not see one face bearing the stamp of a Saxon.

At length the steward came back with a message written by himself, tightly tied and securely sealed.

Will Scarlet thanked him, and bidding Friar Tuck keep close to his side, dashed away at a furious gallop.

Will, however, had no intention of leaving Nottingham immediately. He yearned to see Sargode and Claxton, who had left the cave as soon as they had placed Martha safely in the hands of her friends and ridden in the direction of the first-named man's house.

And innocently cosy Ye Minstrel Inn looked.

A buxom woman was in attendance. Sargode, she said, had gone out, and there was no telling when he might return. If he said five minutes, he was generally absent five hours, while if he declared holiday for a whole day, he might repent of his decision and run back almost as soon as he had crossed the threshold. So there was no placing dependence on such a man as that.

But Will Scarlet knew that Sargode's

wife was talking only for the sake of talking. He also knew that she was watching the friar and himself closely, never letting her gaze wander from them.

"My husband," she said suddenly, and, running into an inner room, closed the door.

Not only did Sargode appear, but Claxton with him.

Quickly, and in as few words as possible, Will Scarlet told them of the capture of Oswald de Burgh, and of the message sent to the castle, and the one to be delivered to Robin Hood.

"So far so good," said Claxton. "It is joy to all Saxon hearts to know that Oswald de Burgh is a prisoner; but will the mere fact of his sending a proclamation save us? I trow not. Forewarned is forearmed. The Saxons must leave Nottingham before the Normans rise against them. We'll see to that, Will Scarlet, and attend you in the forest as quickly as possible."

"But where are the people to go to?" Friar Tuck asked.

"The majority will journey south. They are not without funds, and even if some of them be so, they will receive help, for the poor are the friends of the poor. Fear nothing! The exodus shall take place before sundown."

"But what if the Normans attack them?"

"They will be in no great hurry to do so, and not at all in the open country," Claxton replied. "It's in the dead of night that the Normans do their foul work."

"True enough," said Will Scarlet.

"We have room for a hundred new men, for since Prince John is so busy Robin Hood's forest army will need recruiting. Here's health to you, heroes that you are. And now, good Friar Tuck, we will begone."

"Stay!" Sargode said, holding up his hand. "What means that blare of trumpets?"

Claxton ran out into the street, and returned almost immediately.

"By all that is evil," he said. "Prince John has arrived in person, with such a host of men as the people of Nottingham never yet set eyes upon.

I go now to warn our brethren. There is no time to lose. Go, and go quickly, they must."

"Show us where we can see this traitor prince," Will Scarlet said.

"Come to the roof and hide behind the chimneys," Sargode said. "You will see all there, and doubtless it will be a grand show."

Again the trumpets rang out their notes on the startled air, and presently the signal was answered from the castle, and the steward, mounting his horse and accompanied by a suitable escort, rode with all haste to do homage to the royal guest.

It was as Sargode had said—a grand show.

Surrounded by nobles, Prince John, superbly dressed, mounted on a white horse, rode under a canopy of purple and gold, held by four knights in full armour.

In front of the prince came a hundred men, armed with lance and battle-axe, and double that number brought up the rear.

Of esquires, pages, and attendants there appeared to be no end, and the sun, indeed, flashed on as gay a scene as the ancient city had ever witnessed.

Prince John's visit was a surprise.

No notice had been sent of it to Oswald de Burgh, and the state of his steward's mind may be better imagined than described. He knelt in silence at the prince's side, holding his stirrup as a sign of humility.

"What means this?" John demanded, regarding him sternly. "How comes it that Oswald de Burgh is not here? Surely, my heralds blew loud enough?"

"Oswald de Burgh would fain be in my place, your royal highness," the steward replied; "but that cannot be."

"You speak in riddles," Prince John said. "Has his health failed him, or has he gone a-hunting?"

"Alas! Oswald de Burgh has fallen into the hands of Robin Hood. Yesterday—"

Prince John waited to hear no more.

"You lie!" he cried, clenching his mailed hand. "It cannot be true. This is some idle excuse, but I'll have none of it!"

"Pardon, prince; but it is only too true. I have it written with his own hands."

"By the bones of my royal father!" Prince John thundered, "things have come to a pretty pass. But I have no great pity for Oswald de Burgh, as he is but a toy in this outlaw's hands. I'll seek Robin Hood myself, and see what sort of metal he is made of. On to the castle; I'll hear your story there."

"My master," said the steward, "has sent a proclamation to spare the Saxons, even after they had run riot through the city."

"I will deal with that another time," the prince responded impatiently. "Give the signal to advance. We need rest and refreshment."

Will Scarlet and Friar Tuck, having seen all they wanted to, descended from the roof of Ye Minstrel Inn and sought the interior.

"There are rough times in store for us," the friar remarked, with a smile on his lips. "Will, you did well to advise a hundred new men. It seems to me that twice that number will be welcome."

"There are no stint of them ready to serve Robin Hood," Claxton remarked.

"And by my faith! the forest and the cleared lands that abound within it are large enough to support thousands instead of hundreds," Friar Tuck rejoined. "Friend Will, the crowd of gaping Normans have followed in Prince John's train, so we will depart."

In all haste they did so, and unchallenged, and it was not until they were deep in the forest that they checked the pace of their ardent horses.

They were anxious to get back, for they had much news to tell Robin Hood, and much to be done to prepare for Prince John's invasion into the forest.

CHAPTER 7.

An Escape in the Storm.

IN the meantime Robin Hood sat facing his prisoner.

"I have done your bidding," Oswald de Burgh said, "and it is only right according to the laws of chivalry that

you should extend the hand of mercy to me."

"Is it one of the laws of chivalry to steal a timid woman from her friends?" Robin Hood demanded, sneering. "Do the laws of chivalry teach its disciples to plunge innocent men into dungeons, to burn homesteads, to turn women and children into the cold? Answer me these things, and if you can convince me that they are right, you shall go free."

"I have acted under orders," Oswald de Burgh replied sullenly.

"Not from Richard, our lion-hearted king, I'll swear," Robin Hood said. "He promised redress for Saxon wrongs, but no sooner did he set sail for the Holy Land than all his outspoken wishes were set at nought, his commands thrown to the winds, and a race of tyrants, backed up by Prince John, overran the land. Oswald de Burgh, you are one of those tyrants."

"You call me so. What need is there for me to answer, since I am in your power?"

"Can you deny it?" Robin Hood said. "By Heaven! the memory of wrongs done to me and mine almost drive me mad. Was not my father Earl of Huntingdon? Was there ever nobler, kinder, gentler race than the Fitzooths, of which my father was one? Was it not enough to rob him of his lands, but that you must send your minions to murder him?"

"He disobeyed the laws of the forest."

"Laws of your own making," Robin Hood said. "Man, when I, by no choice of my own, became an outcast and an outlaw, I made laws of my own, and one was that every Norman tyrant that fell into my hands should die."

"Had I known what humour I should find you in, I would rather that my hand withered than it should sign my name to that parchment. Robin Hood, you obtained it by fraud."

"Call it what you will. My men shall judge between you and me."

"A mock trial," said Oswald de Burgh. "I am already doomed before the verdict is given."

"Nevertheless, it shall be as I say," Robin responded. "Ho there.

foresters! This fellow accuses us of dishonesty. You know his history, and I leave him in your hands. Tell me what he deserves."

"Death! Death!" cried the outlaws as if with one voice.

"And die you shall," said Robin Hood. "I had a mind to keep the sword of fate hanging above your head, that I might see you suffer as you have made others suffer; but I will be merciful. You shall die as my father died!"

At that moment Maid Marian came to the outlaw's side.

"Robin," she said, placing her arm round his neck, "I have a favour to ask you."

"What!" he cried, "you would not plead for this man?"

"Nay," Marian replied. "He deserves death; but I beg of you not to let him die near this place."

Robin Hood leaned his chin upon his hand and remained silent for some moments.

"Marian," he said at length, "you are right. Your words have put a new idea into his head. Oswald de Burgh should die where once my father's home stood."

"Will Scarlet and Friar Tuck!" shouted a forester at the mouth of the cave.

"They are welcome!" cried Robin Hood, starting up. "They have come in time to see justice done. Ho there! prepare a cart, and yoke a team of horses to it. Oswald de Burgh shall go to the gallows like the felon and murderer he is."

Some delay, however, occurred, for Will Scarlet begged an audience with his chief, and drawing apart they stood talking of what had happened at Nottingham.

"This is bad, yet good news," Robin Hood said. "We have our hands full, but we will fight on to the bitter end. But one thing at a time. I shall know no rest until Oswald de Burgh is past doing further harm. Ho there! is the cart ready?"

"Yes," came the reply.

"Then we will start at once," Robin said. "In with the villain. Friar Tuck, will you attend this man?"

"Willingly," the friar returned.
"I'll have none of this man!" Oswald de Burgh cried, recoiling. "It would be a mockery."

"And indeed, so I think," the friar said. "Words of consolation would fall strangely in his ears. Let him go his way."

Maid Marian hid her face in her hands and turned her back as Oswald de Burgh was dragged from the cave.

Death in any form was terrible to her gentle nature, and day and night she prayed for peace and happier times.

Only a few foresters attended the cart, which, setting out, proceeded through the densest part of the forest.

And now, as if even nature frowned upon the Sheriff of Nottingham, great clouds rolled up and thunder growled low down in the sky.

Such a tempest as was approaching was unusual at that time of the year; but the weather had been hot and sultry for some days, and had remained so, in spite of the lesser storm which had swept over Nottingham two days previously.

"Let us hasten," said Robin Hood presently.

As the driver cracked his whip over the horses' heads there came a blinding flash of light, instantly followed by a sound as if the earth had been rent in twain.

The startled horses reared, plunged, and leaping sideways dashed the cart against a tree.

In a moment it was overturned, and the driver, Robin Hood, and the prisoner were thrown violently out.

In striking the earth, the cords that held Oswald de Burgh's wrists burst.

The Sheriff of Nottingham started to his feet.

Fear lent him wings, and he ran like a hare, amid thunder and lightning and a deluge of rain that completely hid him from view.

In vain did the foresters ride hither and thither.

The very elements were against them, and at last, crestfallen, and with their breasts swelling with rage, they were compelled to confess that Oswald de Burgh had escaped.

Robin Hood lay where he fell until Will Scarlet raised him in his arms.

The fall had stunned him, but he soon recovered consciousness.

"Where is Oswald de Burgh?" were his first words.

"Gone! The storm fiend came to his rescue."

Then came a spell of silence, broken by the outlaw chief.

"Walk back with me, brave Will Scarlet," he said. "I blame no one. To-day the hand of Heaven seems against us; but all may be for the best. Prince John is at Nottingham; he will seek us, and perchance we may kill two birds of evil with one stone!"

* * * *

Late on the following day a cart driven by a Norman yeoman rattled through the uneven streets of Nottingham and passed unchallenged until it reached the outer lodge of the castle.

The driver, leaping down, raised a heap of dirty straw, and out from the midst of it crawled Oswald de Burgh.

Unwashed, with armour bent and clothes in rags, his face and hands torn and scratched by his long scramble through brake and brier, the sheriff presented at once a miserable and comical spectacle.

The attendants had much to do to keep from laughing outright.

"Prince John has arrived!" said one of the men, saluting with his halberd.

A bitter execration burst from De Burgh's bloodless lips.

"The fiend seize him, prince though he be!" he hissed. "He will heap taunts and reproaches on my head. Stay! I must not see him until I am better attired; I will enter by the postern. Ha! Death and confusion! fate is against me."

The sound of trumpets and the sudden raising of the portcullis proclaimed that Prince John and his train of knights were leaving the castle.

The prince and his marshal came first, but stopped abruptly at the sight of the sheriff.

"Now, by England's crown!" exclaimed Prince John, throwing his head back and laughing boisterously, "I did not dream that Oswald de Burgh would

come to me in so rough a style. What! have you been carousing with some friends and forgot your way back to the castle?"

"Your royal highness jokes exceedingly well," Oswald de Burgh replied, biting his lip. "It is the privilege only of those that hold highest rank in the land."

"How now?" rejoined the prince, frowning so that his beetling eyebrows met. "Am I to ask you to teach me how to speak?"

"Your highness will forgive me this and more when I tell you all," Oswald de Burgh said, beginning to tremble. "I fell into the hands of that villain Robin Hood, and escaped only by a miracle."

"You fought him and his army of foresters and beat them, eh?" demanded the prince, sneering sardonically. "Such a tale will do for gossips to prate about before curfew, but it falls none too pleasantly on my ears."

"Does your highness think that I would dare to lie in your presence?" said Oswald de Burgh.

"You would be only one of many," Prince John replied. "Lies at my court are as plentiful as berries in autumn."

This being intended as another joke, the prince's attendants indulged in a half-hearted laugh at their own expense.

"I swear to you that I speak but the truth," Oswald de Burgh said, racked with rage and humiliation. "Bear with me, your royal highness, and hear my tale at your leisure."

"And so will I," replied the prince. "Trust me that I came to Nottingham for no idle purpose, but to hunt down this same Robin Hood and to relieve the land of such a pest. And so the Saxons broke into open revolt! Had I but known—"

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The savage prince, losing all control over himself, broke into a torrent of abuse against a long-suffering people, and ended by flinging himself off his horse.

"I'll not ride to-day until I know the truth of it from your lips," he said, towering over Oswald de Burgh. "I have seen this Robin Hood—ay, and so many strange stories have come to my ears of him since then that he seems to be more than man. But be he man or fiend, I'll run him to earth and take his head back with me to London. Attend me without delay. You can speak with dirty face as well as clean."

Just then a man on horseback threw a packet over the outer gate as he dashed past.

It was picked up and at once handed to Prince John, who tore it open, glanced at its contents, and then crushed it in his hand.

"What ails your highness?" Oswald de Burgh demanded. "I fear you have had bad news from London."

"Bad news!" Prince John thundered. "By the bones of the Conqueror! this passes all tolerance. Robin Hood sends calling me usurper and traitor to my brother Richard. Moreover, he tells me to look to my head, and hopes that you, my dupe and fool, enjoyed yourself in his domain. Follow me, Oswald de Burgh! This rascal of a rebel is doomed, even though I set every man in the kingdom at him."

While Prince John was thus raging with passion, Robin Hood was laughing at the fright he knew that his letter would give the tyrant.

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Crown Court, Chancery Lane, London, W.C.2.

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Co., Ltd., London; &

R. P. SMITH MAGAZINE CO.
3 Brook Street—R. 44

Lawrence,

Massachusetts

ourt, Chancery Lane, W.C.2.
ondon and Aylesbury.
for Canada, The Imperial News
am Dawson & Sons, Ltd., London.